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ABSTRACT

To confirm or refute impressions that primary grade children do little in the way of actual school work during the day, a principal conducted informal observations in several first and second grade classrooms. Each type of activity the children might perform, such as reading, coloring, or moving about the room, was grouped into three major categories: high level work, low level work, and down time. Time spent on activities was recorded in full minutes. The records showed that most of the children chosen by their teachers as good workers were not working as long or as hard as they might have been, or as their teachers believed. Based on the observations, the school's model of primary grade instruction was redesigned to one in which children were less dependent on the teachers and more responsible for their own learning. Changes in three areas were implemented: (1) procedures, such as giving directions and explanations for seatwork only to the children who were going to use them; (2) instructional organization, such as using teacher aides, peer tutoring, and learning centers; and (3) seatwork, such as making assignments that require students' thinking and effort, are presented in context; they have purpose, and combine rather than isolate skills. Follow-up observations of two of the classrooms indicated that the changes had increased the amount of students' high level work, as well as improved their attitude and effort. (HTH)

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Increasing Primary Grade Childrens' Reading/Language Arts Worktime: Making Changes in Procedures, Organization, and Seatwork

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Probably no one in education works more than a primary grade teacher, and probably no one works less than her pupils. While the teacher is performing brilliantly at center stage--directing, explaining, assisting, organizing, correcting, disciplining--virtually every minute of the school day, her supporting cast is merely doing their bit, then moving off into the wings to wait for their next cue. As long as they wait quietly, the teacher never seems to notice how small are the parts they play in what is essentially her show.

As a principal who visits classrooms regularly, I noticed long ago that primary grade children don't seem to do much work. They spend a lot of time listening--or perhaps only waiting--while the teacher give directions or one child at a time performs. Their day is repeatedly interrupted by routines such as attendance taking, distribution of materials, and getting in line. And while their teacher is busy with small groups, when they should be most productive working independently, they zoom through their assigned tasks in just a few minutes and wind up spending most of their time drawing, playging, or daydreaming.

When I discussed these impressions with teachers, they were more disbelieving than defensive. They felt certain that they were giving plenty of work, more than enough to keep children busy most of the school day. How could it be otherwise when they regularly burned the midnight oil

in order to plan and correct lessons for their classes, when they assigned so many workbook pages, wrote so much on the chalk boards, and handed out so many dittoed sheets?

Was I mistaken or were the teachers? I decided to find out. I planned to spend some long stretches of time in several first and second grade classrooms at our school and two nearby schools and, like a real researcher, collect data. This data would be the kinds of activities that selected children engaged in during the reading/language arts time on a typical morning and how long they stayed with each. Trying to be fair, I asked teachers to pick two children for me to follow, one from their top reading group and one from the bottom group, but both good steady workers.

The recording sheet I used had sections for each type of activity a child might do, such as reading, coloring, or wandering around the room, grouped into three major divisions labeled "high level work," "low level work," and "down time." Some of the teachers were not completely happy with these labels or all the activities under them since they had a higher opinion of the value of, for example, "copying," than I had. Ultimately, however, the question of whether certain activities were really "low level" were overshadowed by the fact that many children spent so much time at some of them. While a teacher might argue that drawing pictures is worthwhile because it helps children to understand a story, she was not willing to contend that her pupils should spend forty minutes out of ninety just drawing.

For timing, I used my wristwatch, recording only full minutes and ignoring brief interruptions.

Even though the things I saw children do did not always fit neatly into one type of activity and the time they spent rarely worked out in full minutes, I felt satisfied with the results. My large divisions served my purpose of comparing serious work, to trivialities, to wasted time. And the activity sections showed teachers exactly what their pupils were doing.

Following is a chart of the information that was significant to me. I have not performed any statistics on it because means, percentiles, etc. just aren't relevant to the question originally asked. The point is that most of the children chosen by their teachers as good workers, weren't working as long or as hard as they might have been--or as their teachers believed.* On the chart total minutes differ because some classes spent more time on opening ceremonies before beginning the reading/language arts period and some had to break for music, art or library during the morning.

It is important to recognize that what is labeled "high level work" time included time spent listening. As suggested earlier, the problem with listening is that children may not be doing that at all and an observer has no way of knowing. In several situations I noted that children were being asked to listen to things that did not really pertain to them, such as directions for another reading group. In other situations the teacher told children things they already knew or didn't care to hear. Therefore, we must look at high level work totals skeptically when they include large amounts of listening time.

*Yet, obviously, a few children made very good use of time. This happened because on that day their teachers had assigned the kinds of seatwork that we all later agreed should be used for efficient time use.

NAMES	HIGH LEVEL WORK	LOW LEVEL WORK	DOWN TIME	TOTAL MINUTES	LISTENING
Andy	46	31	23	100	10
Brian	31	47	24	100	20
Betsy	33	32	26	90	15
Jeff	45	11	35	90	20
Monica	31	62	12	105	11
John	20	55	30	105	6
Angela	75	2	8	85	13
Carrie	41	36	8	85	9
Joey	20	65	7	90	15
Elizabeth	49	28	12	90	15
Keira	52	15	13	80	10
Karrie	52	22	6	80	15

Compared to the sophisticated time-on-task research studies that have been done over the past decade,[1] this little experiment is both shallow and imprecise, but then its aims were decidedly modest. Since it had already been demonstrated by others that children's work time is relatively small[2] and that work time correlates with achievement,[3] all that remained was for me to convince myself and teachers that our pupils were part of those statistics and then resolve to go on and do something about it.

"Doing something about it" meant making changes in keeping with our school educational philosophy that would increase children's work time in general and their high level work time in specific. This was not a simple matter of assigning more seatwork and stiffening discipline. In terms of number of assignments and teacher time, the seatwork load was already quite heavy. And children were not misbehaving; they were acting like normal people who are not very absorbed in what they are doing. Rather than just turning up the pressure, we believed we had to redesign our model of primary instruction, moving away from the standard structure where children are so dependent on the teacher toward one where they would be more responsible for their own learning. We believed also that better quality seatwork had to be part of that model for it to succeed.

Why had we never tried this type of approach before, we wondered. But we knew why. Like teachers (and principals and parents) the world over we held a rather low opinion of what six and seven year olds could do, and an even lower one of what they would do if they were not closely supervised. Since close supervision is not possible when a teacher is teaching three or more reading groups in less than two hours' time, we had accommodated to our pessimistic view of reality by assigning work so routine that children could not go astray and--as long as they were not disruptive--alowing them to draw and color when it was done.

After much soul searching and discussion (also a brief round of video taping that allowed teachers to see what pupils were doing while they were busy), we came up with a number of changes we thought worth trying, and as we talked about them saw that they fell into three major areas:

1. changes in classroom procedures to make pupils more independent and to cut waiting time,
2. changes in the way we organized pupils for instruction that would allow other adults and children to take over for the teacher at times and allow her to use her time more efficiently,
3. changes in seatwork tasks and materials that would not only increase the proportion of high level to low level tasks but would encourage children to work longer, more independently, and with a higher degree of involvement.

The specifics of change in all three areas are described and explained below.

Changes in Procedures

Some of the considerable time children in primary classrooms spend waiting is necessary for basic order in a crowd, but a lot of it that results from poor planning and lack of trust could be eliminated or at least cut down. Here are some examples of things teachers can do:

1. Give directions and explanations for seatwork only to the children who are going to use them. Probably the best place is in the small group, even if that means the day before. Children can be trained to remember, especially if you follow the next guideline.

2. Try to severely limit the number of formats for worksheets and workbook pages. Teach those formats thoroughly at the beginning of the year and then just vary the content.
3. Avoid lessons where one child recites at length while others wait their turn. Do "Show and Tell" in a small group setting with everyone interacting on the same topic rather than allowing one at a time to ramble on at will. Change "Round Robin" reading to choral reading or dramatization where all children have short parts. Reorganize the opening of the day ceremonies to eliminate having one child read the date, weather report, daily plans, etc.
4. Make it easier for children doing seatwork to get help when the teacher is occupied. Appoint child tutors from among those who are good at directions, spelling, etc. and encourage others to consult them. Identify classroom reference sources and teach children how to use them. Schedule brief teacher consultation times between reading groups when those in dire straits can come to you.
5. Make it okay for a child to skip or improvise on a piece of work when all else fails. When sources of help have been exhausted (or even when enthusiasm is too high to stop), a child should be able to leave a blank or invent a spelling until he/she can seek help from the teacher.
6. Plan self-correcting assignments. Provide answer sheets (that can be supervised by child tutors) for children to correct their own exercises. If that makes you anxious, you can always spot check afterward.

7. When helping or checking work, go around to children, don't make them come to you. That way you avoid the lineup at your desk (in which there is bound to be misbehavior) and children can do other work while they're waiting.

Changes in Instructional Organization

In a classroom there are many times when more or less than one teacher is needed. Some activities are so complicated that they really demand two supervisors, and reading groups would go more smoothly if the teacher had a helper to answer questions from the rest of the class and enforce discipline. At the same time, teachers often do things for children that they could do for themselves, such as drilling with flash cards. If the classroom could be organized in a number of different ways with different people--and at times, materials--taking over some of the instruction, the teacher could be where she was most needed, reducing waiting time and monitoring work that she might otherwise not assign because of its difficulty. Below are some organizational patterns that break the mold of teacher-led whole class and small groups.

1. Teacher aide. While this is far from a new idea, it is underappreciated and under-used. Many more things could be tried than are now possible and the standard things could be done more efficiently. Above all, those children most often ignored because the teacher hasn't got time for them--the slow and the gifted--could be given some special attention. Whatever the expense, even in these cost conscious times, such a boost to instruction at this most important stage of schooling, where often the line is drawn forever between learners and non-learners, would be well worth the money. In later years costs would be offset by savings in remedial teaching, vandalism repair, and discipline.

2. Two teacher team. For this type of arrangement it would probably be necessary to break down part of the wall between two classrooms and to mesh two class schedules. While one teacher meets a reading group composed of pupils from both classes, the other can supervise seatwork, teach a large group, or take the rest of both classes to the library. Because of combining two classes for reading groups, it may be possible to cut down on the total number of groups, thereby giving both teachers more time to do other things.

3. Learning centers. With a center structure self-teaching (and often self-checking) materials are placed in several work areas around the room. Usually, the centers remain stable for a week or more while children choose or are assigned to work in a certain number of them. The number of centers, order, and checking procedures can be adjusted to individual needs, helping children to make better use of their work time.

4. Peer tutoring. Although many teachers use this technique in a small way to help the few perpetual stragglers, it is rarely used as a major instructional pattern. But it can be. Courtney Cazden cites three peer tutoring models that can be used together to include all children in a classroom: 1) one child teaching another or a small group, 2) two children working collaboratively on a problem, 3) two children taking turns as teacher and pupil.[4] These models demand training of all pupils at the beginning of the school year and daily briefing of tutors throughout the year. But even 30 minutes a day spent this way is less than the teacher spends in repeating directions, giving tests, drilling, etc. to the whole class.

5. Individualized study programs. In this program each child makes his or her own work plan for a week, and a quantity of self-teaching materials is necessary. Then, the teacher moves out of her traditional role as instructor and becomes guide and advisor. Of course, the teacher saves no time this way. She is as busy as always, conferring with children and providing each with just the right materials, but her pupils are as busy as she. When the program is done right, no pupil finished prematurely or has to wait for something to do.

6. Pupil-led small groups. Both reading groups and project groups meet without the teacher part of the time. For reading groups a student leader can be appointed or all pupils can share responsibility. Without the teacher, the group can do such things as reading aloud, oral drills, and checking of workbook pages. Project groups can discuss, allocate tasks, and work on them together. While these activities are going on, the teacher circulates, reinforcing group process, keeping groups on track, helping them over the rough spots, and taking over when she is needed for an unfamiliar or difficult activity. The success of this arrangement depends on training children thoroughly for leadership and in careful planning of the teacher's participation so that no group will be left on its own too long.

Of all the organizational changes we decided on, peer-tutoring and pupil-led groups aroused the most anxiety in teachers. Although they thought the ideas were good on paper, they weren't sure that first and second graders could carry them off. My advice was to start on a small scale with only the most capable pupils and to over-train them. Teachers

who took the risk came back to report that results were better than hoped for. Even our kindergarteners were able to work unsupervised as a project group, rehearsing and performing a play they had written with their teacher as a language experience. I wasn't a bit surprised. Haven't we all seen young children play house and school, doing a marvelous job of mimicking parents, teachers, and their own most subservient selves? All that is required for peer tutoring and group situations is some very good mimicking, reinforced by training and spot checking. Certainly they can handle drill, review and checking activities. All the subtle questioning and all presentation of new material is left for the teacher--unless, of course, she discovers they can handle that, too.

Changes in Seatwork

Most primary grade reading/language arts seatwork conforms only too well to our low opinion of children's skills and sense of responsibility. Typically, assignments ask that pupils copy, circle or fill in blanks; they are not expected to produce anthing of their own or even to supply whole sentence answers. A second problem is that assignments are almost always practice of a fragmentary skill that the teacher has just taught. Rarely is a worksheet used to teach something new or to push pupils to combine the skills they already possess and apply them at a higher level.

As I have watched children to such assignments, I have seen four tyres of responses, none of which the teacher hoped for. Some children of the very lowest ability can't do the work because they don't understand the directions or can't read enough of the words, so they scribble nonsense or leave blanks. Others, usually children of modest ability but lots of "street smarts," find ways to get the right answers from other children's papers. Still others, and these are usually the brightest in the class, try to figure out the "trick" of the assignment (such as all

the right words begin with "b") and fill in all the blanks without reading any of the sentences. The rest do the assignment according to the directions but find it so easy that they are able to breeze through with little thought or effort. I would contend that none of these children is learning much--nor can they--with such simple-minded seatwork. They are doing busy work, and we should not be surprised that it does not absorb them or even keep them busy for very long.

As we looked at our seatwork assignments, we became more and more convinced that a lot of them could not possibly do the job we wanted. Slowly, many of our teachers' concepts of "high level" and "low level" work began to change. Even beyond the original disagreement, I had made a compromise in my observation recordings, putting all activities that required reading or writing of even single words in the "high level" category. At that stage I just hadn't wanted to argue the point with teachers. But now I no longer had to; we all wanted "real work" and we were making progress toward defining what we meant by that and creating specific examples.

In this final section of this article I will give in explicit form the definition that we now use - implicitly - when planning seatwork and I will describe just a few of the reading/language arts activities that we use regularly with different content.

Real work

--has context; it deals with ideas, information, feelings and experiences not just letters, sounds, and isolated words

--is whole: children work with complete stories and messages, not just pieces of them.

--has purpose: children need reasons for doing work that go beyond pleasing the teacher or believing her assurance that "you will need to know this someday."

--is productive: children create their own language samples instead of tinkering with sentences written by adults.

--combines skills: children use decoding, comprehending, composing, spelling, drawing, etc., as parts of one job, just as adults do in the real world.

--demands thinking and effort: children cannot just copy, circle, and fill the blanks, they have to exert their mental powers.

--can be done differently by children of different abilities and interests; although there may be one class assignment, there are 25 individual products.

--leads to new problems, knowledge, and interests.

Examples:

1. After reading a heavily patterned story or poem in reading group, children write their own ideas in the same pattern. Available patterns range from very easy, such as "One, Two, Buckle My Shoe" to very complex, such as "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, Very Bad, No Good Day."
2. On each child's birthday his/her classmates make greeting cards that use some of the stock phrases from commercial cards on display and add a personal message or wish, e.g., "I hope you get the new bicycle you want."
3. Children transform a favorite story into a play, turning narrative into dialogue, assigning and practicing roles, then giving a performance for the rest of the class.
4. From time to time the class makes a book on a single topic to which each child contributes a written and illustrated page. Possibilities are excuses (e.g., "My paper looks messy because..", "I Can't Go To Bed Until...", "Why I Like [a specific holiday]",

"Alphabet Rhymes", "What We Do in [a season of the year] ".

5. A group writes dialogue for a familiar picture book, or individual children write new dialogue for comic strips.
6. Children write questions about a story they have read silently to ask their classmates during reading group the next day.
7. A group does research on an animal, place, event, by having one child read aloud from a reference source (or use taped version of teacher reading). Afterward, other group members select which information they think is important and one child transcribes their words into a report.
8. A group prepares a choral reading of a poem for presentation to classmates.
9. At the end of the week (and after some discussion with the teacher) each child writes a summary of what he/she has learned that week to take home to parents.
10. Children write a new ending for a favorite story. (Our kindergarteners did one for Mousekin Finds a Friend and our second graders for Where the Wild Things Are.)
11. Children make invitations, posters, thank you notes, etc. for school events.
12. Groups or individuals write accounts of field trips to be kept in scrapbook of photos and souvenirs.
13. When a child completes a recreational book, he/she prepares an oral report for classmates.

As you can see, these activities are the kind that can be used many times over with different content. They will not become boring as long as the readings and experiences on which they are based are varied and

challenging. Of all types of seatwork, however, the most often used--even with first graders--should be silent reading. We feel strongly that this particular kind of practice is vital for progress in all areas of the language arts.

Throughout the school year teachers generated new ideas at weekly team meetings and tried them out as they went along. All ideas were shared, but not teacher was pressured to try anything that did not feel right or to get more deeply involved than she wanted to. As a result, some classrooms changed dramatically over the months and others only a little. Still none of us feels that we are finished with the process. We need time to refine our techniques, cull our failures, and grow comfortable in our new roles. And within our three part framework there are still many unexplored possibilities.

We are certainly not ready for formal evaluation. But near the end of the year, I did go back to the classrooms of two teachers who were very active in making change and followed the same four children again. The time distributions for their activities, fall and spring, are given below:

NAMES		HLW	LLW	DT	TOTAL MINUTES	LISTENING
Betsy	F	33	32	26	90	15
	S	65	0	15	80	21
Jeff	F	45	11	35	90	20
	S	69	5	6	80	12
Keira	F	52	15	13	80	10
	S	67	10	8	85	12
Karrie	F	52	22	6	80	15
	S	70	4	10	85	13

It may be that the increases in high level work these children showed were just a matter of chance, the difference between a good day and a bad one. But I don't believe that for a minute. I saw too many improvements in those classrooms for childrens' work time not to be affected. But beyond the gains in minutes were changes in effort and attitude that impressed me more: children absorbed in their tasks, willing to stay with them despite interruptions and setbacks, children making independent decisions and working complex problems through to successful conclusions.

In short, I watched a very different show from the one performed in the fall. Although the teacher still had a major role, the play was no longer her star vehicle. Now all pupils had substantial parts of their own and frequent opportunities to grab the limelight.

FOOTNOTES

1. See, for example, Carolyn Denham and Ann Lieberman, eds., Time to Learn (NIE, 1980).

2. Barak V. Rosenshine, "Content, Time and Direct Instruction," in Research on Teaching: Concepts, Findings and Implications, eds., Penelope L. Peterson and Herbert J. Walberg (Berkeley: McCutchan, 1979) 28-53.

   Raquel Muir, "A Teacher Implements Instructional Changes Using the BTES Framework," in Time to Learn, eds. Denham and Lieberman, 200.

3. Rosenshine, 47.

   Charles W. Fisher, et.al., "Teaching Behaviors, Academic Learning Time and Student Achievement. An Overview" in Time to Learn, eds. Denham and Lieberman, 15-16.

4. Courtney Cazden in an untitled address at the annual convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, Cincinnati, 1980.